

# Trials of the Dead-Letter Office

**A** FACETIOUS letter written a quarter of a century ago by Henry Ward Beecher furnishes food for thought on the subject of epistolary mortality, howbeit in this case the epistle is clearly a highly promising candidate for immortality. A note written by Mr. Beecher containing a check for one hundred and fifty dollars was returned from the Dead-Letter Office in Washington, and when he received the usual notice he sent this to the postmaster:

Oct. 28, 1880.

COLONEL McLEER. Dear Sir.—Your notice that a letter of mine was dead and subject to my order is before me.

We must all die! And though the premature decease of my poor letter should excite a proper sympathy (and I hope it does), yet I am greatly sustained under the affliction.

What was the date of its death? Of what did it die? Had it in its last hours proper attention and such consolation as befits the melancholy occasion? Did it leave any effects?

Will you kindly see to its funeral? I am strongly inclined to cremation.

May I ask if any other letters of mine are sick—dangerously sick? If any departs this life hereafter don't notify me until after the funeral. Affectionately,

HENRY WARD BEECHER.

On learning that the letter contained a check, Mr. Beecher called at the office and withdrew the request for its cremation.

The simulated misconception of the status of a "dead letter" by the famous clergyman had its counterpart in the genuine alarm of the Irish domestic who, when told by the postman that he had a dead letter for her, fell into paroxysms of terror at the thought that it had come direct from her dear old mother in purgatory. Some people who really ought to know better have an almost equally flagrant and inexcusable misunderstanding as to the functions of the bureau in Washington where the electrocution of the delinquent epistles is presumably administered.

## Office Finds a Trunk

**N**OT long ago the Post-Office Department received notice from a man in Pennsylvania that his wife had lost her trunk, which he desired the authorities to look up. Upon speaking of the matter to one of his friends, it was waggishly suggested to the loser that the trunk might be located by communicating with the Dead-Letter Office, to which he promptly wrote. This letter struck a newspaper correspondent as being so humorous that he printed it in his paper, which, it was thought, closed the incident. Ridicule was turned to amazement, however, when a letter came from the same man, which stated that the trunk had been found, and expressed thanks for the interest taken by the department in tracing the lost baggage. He had seen the publication in the paper, and supposed it had been made for the purpose of aiding in the search.

The Dead-Letter Office is neither a medium for the transmission of intelligence from souls immured in purgatory, nor a tribunal for the reclamation of lost luggage. It is a branch of the department at Washington to which are sent from all the post-offices of the country mail matter that is for any reason undeliverable to the persons addressed.

This undeliverable mail falls naturally into two classes: unmailable and unclaimed. The unmailable class consists of the matter that is not sufficiently prepaid, or is so incorrectly or illegibly addressed that its destination cannot be ascertained. It comprises twenty per cent. of the whole mass of undeliverable, and is not "dead" at all, having



never gone beyond the mailing office till it was forwarded to the morgue at the capital. The unclaimed class comprises those letters, etc., that being properly addressed and prepaid reached the office of destination, but were not called for and could not be delivered.

The report for the official year 1904 shows that the receipts of undelivered matter from all sources was nearly eleven million pieces, an increase of seven and one-half per cent. Of

By **HENRY A. CASTLE**

Former Auditor for the Post-Office Department

these, three million pieces were restored to the owners. Over fifty thousand sealed letters without any address were turned in, besides nearly seventy thousand packages and parcels. There were sixty-five thousand letters that contained money, aggregating fifty-three thousand dollars, and sixty-four thousand that contained drafts, checks, money-orders, and notes of a face value of two million dollars.

The fatal disorders which struggle for supremacy in furnishing work for the undertakers at the Dead-Letter Office may be classified under two heads: carelessness and ignorance. In the more excusable cases of fatal ignorance we may place the pathetic efforts of foreigners to compass the mysteries of our geographic names.

At the Chicago post-office a record is kept of the different ways of spelling the name of that city on mail addresses. At last accounts three hundred and forty-seven varieties had been tabulated. Among the less intricate of these were Zizazo, Jagjago, Hipaho, Jajijo and Chahicho.

## Work for "Blind Readers"

**A** FEW examples of difficult addresses on foreign letters, deciphered by the "blind readers" are: "Sirianostit Tomsville" (Sarah Ann Street, Tompkinsville); "Merryone" (Matteawan, New York); "Istochinchistommo" (East Kingston, New York); "Soccioples" (Scotch Plains). A letter addressed "Lost Soldier" was properly delivered at Lost Cabin, Rawlins County, Wyoming. A correspondent in Tennessee addressed a friend in Texas at "Calf City," and the letter was delivered, through the agency of the Dead-Letter Office, at Wolfe City. A writer in Minneapolis addressed a Catholic divine at "Greatbrook, Conn.," but as there is no such post-office in existence, it was delivered correctly at Waterbury, Connecticut.

As the prime object of writing a letter is to get it to its destination and have it read by the person to whom it is written, it would seem natural that a little thought should be given to the one thing necessary to that end, namely, putting the proper address upon it. Every day thousands of letters are mailed, conveying important messages and even containing inclosures of large value, which are complete in every respect except that their addresses are incomplete, or illegible, or confused. Many letters are dropped into the mails without any address whatever; some are addressed to a certain town in one State, when they are meant for a town of the same name in another; some are mailed with a street address, but with no town; some with a town, but without a State, and so on up and down the gamut of possible deficiencies. Post-office employees, who are endowed with extraordinary patience as well as unusual intelligence, consult directories and gazetteers and contrive by lucky guesses to save a considerable part of this flotsam and jetsam of the mails from the Dead-Letter Office; but much of it gets there, and where any clue is afforded to the sender it is returned to him, usually after it has ceased to have any value.

## Terrors of Chinese Phonetics

**T**HIS feature of exerting every possible effort to deliver unclaimed mail before sending it to the Dead-Letter Office is something original with the American postal system. Great persistence is shown in the "try" line. A letter came to this country from Russia, bearing the simple address, "F. Simon, America," and the postal authorities delivered it to the man for whom it was intended. It traveled five thousand three hundred and seventy miles to reach the New York post-office, but no F. Simon was known there. Then the letter went to Washington, and then to North Dakota, where there are many Finns. Some one out there had heard of an F. Simon in Jamestown, New York, and sent it east again, and F. P. Simon of Jamestown said that it was his.

Some of the most difficult of the blind addresses on letters which perplex the post-office clerks are those which appear on the correspondence of the enterprising citizens of the Flowery Kingdom who sojourn among us. When a Chinaman in New York writes to a friend in Kalamazoo, he places the address, as he understands it, plainly written in orthodox national hieroglyphics, in the upper left-hand corner, and takes it to some fellow-countryman supposed to be skilled in the English tongue, who for a small fee transcribes it in our vernacular as nearly as he can or cares to and starts it on its way. As the Chinese characters are phonetic, the fearful and wonderful work usually made by the half-indifferent and wholly ignorant translator in writing out the name of the town may be left to a vivid imagination. The post-office clerk must do the rest; but, strange to say, ingenuity and intelligence so come to the rescue of stupidity that ninety per cent. of even these densely obscure addresses are correctly deciphered or guessed at, and

the missives are properly delivered. One experienced postmaster has alleged that a vast majority of the letters which go astray are those which never were written. It would be a revelation to the uninitiated

to enumerate the multitude of cases where alleged remittances are claimed or the receipt of real remittances is denied, without a shadow of foundation in truth. The mail system is now so nearly perfect in its departments of collection, forwarding and delivery, that the failure of a letter to arrive is prima facie proof that it was not sent. And the fact that a letter was sent is practically conclusive evidence that it was duly received.

In connection with the Dead-Letter Office the department maintains a museum, in which may be found all sorts of curiosities that find their way into the mails. The lizard, snake, and horned toad, Bowie-knife and pistols, toys and many queer devices go to make up this well-equipped museum. In this display may be seen Benjamin Franklin's account-book, in which in his own hand he kept the accounts of the few post-offices in existence during his long term as Colonial Postmaster-General.

The grotesque, the beautiful, the tragic, the comic, the infernal machine, and dynamite bomb of the anarchist, and the most inane achievements of the practical joker, are all jumbled together, as it were. One of the most startling things received by the museum was a perforated tin can containing three rattlesnakes, very much alive and in fighting trim.

At each of the division headquarters of the Railway Mail Service throughout the country there is established in the city post-office what is called an inquiry or "nixie" division. This division is composed of clerks of the local post-office, carried on the rolls and paid as other clerks, subject to the regular discipline and to occasional detail or transfer to other local-office work. Their principal duty, however, consists in handling the undecipherable or misdirected mail which is turned in to them daily from the several railway mail routes converging in the cities referred to. These inquiry divisions are to all intents and purposes branches of the Dead-Letter Office at Washington. They are performing duties similar to those performed there, and the eighty per cent. of mail handled therein which they forward to its destination direct would otherwise go to the Dead-Letter Office for treatment. The work of these inquiry divisions is important, requiring a high degree of skill and patience. It has never commanded recognition from the department in proportion to its merits, and the general public seldom hears of it.

## Educate the Children

**T**HE daily experiences in each of these branches is similar to that of the central office, but on a smaller scale. Here are some specimen puzzles that were correctly solved: "Brigded Livingston no 16 post office city Hartford, State of Canada or three-ways to No. 39 America." "To Mr. Leedfara, who runs the ferry over across to Long Island for Mary Maguire New York." A piece of mail matter once came to the St. Paul post-office directed: "nelsonnoot corfener senpol." This was quickly translated by the inquiry division experts into "Knute Nelson, Governor, St. Paul," and delivered at the State Capitol to the then chief executive, now the senior United States Senator from Minnesota.

The National Association of Postmasters for the past few years has advocated the plan of having instruction given in the public schools on the proper method of addressing letters. This is being done in some of the large cities and is an admirable plan. Eighteen million children attend the schools of the country. If writing and mailing letters was made a part of the daily instruction, there would be little work for the Dead-Letter Office. The children who go to school in the German Empire are compelled to know how to use the mails. They are required to pass examinations before graduating from the schools, and it is rarely that a person addresses a letter improperly in that country.

